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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**Airpower in Counterinsurgency  
The Search for Missing Doctrine**

**by**

**Thomas D. Barber  
LCDR USN**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **Abstract**

The United States' overwhelming dominance in conventional airpower has often overshadowed its significance in the lower intensity type of conflict resembling insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN). Today, airpower has not only evolved into a major player in conventional warfare but will likely serve a dominant role in COIN operations well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While insurgency and COIN are established terms in joint doctrine, research revealed critical shortfalls in current U.S. military doctrine regarding COIN operations and the use of airpower. In addition to highlighting these shortfalls, this paper analyzes historical and current COIN operations providing valuable lessons learned for the employment of airpower during COIN operations. Finally, the paper integrates these doctrine inadequacies and lessons learned into joint doctrine development considerations to enable the joint force commander (JFC) to effectively synchronize airpower across the full range of military operations during counterinsurgencies.

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*Downplayed, taken for granted, or simply ignored, airpower is usually the last thing that most military professionals think of when the topic of counterinsurgency is raised.*  
-Anonymous

## ***Introduction***

Since the invention of the airplane more than a century ago, the United States, among other nations, have found it to be an excellent tool in fighting conventional and *irregular* warfare. Western powers in particular found it to be an exceptionally useful weapon for fighting rebellious tribesman in early colonial wars and by the 1920's the airplane had transformed into a formidable means to deliver firepower, conduct reconnaissance, transport personnel and supplies, and evacuate wounded soldiers from the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> The United States' overwhelming dominance in conventional airpower has often overshadowed its significance in lower intensity type of conflicts, specifically insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN). Today, airpower has not only evolved into a major player in conventional warfare but will likely serve a dominant role in COIN operations well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While insurgency and COIN are established terms in joint doctrine there is a significant void when it comes to discussing COIN related operations in general.<sup>2</sup> The lack of joint doctrine regarding airpower's role in COIN operations is somewhat understandable when considering the service cultures and conventional-minded military of the past. Nonetheless, the high likelihood of U.S. involvement in future COIN operations, made evident by current operations in the Middle East, warrant the full attention and efforts of the U.S. military. In order for the joint force commander (JFC) to effectively employ airpower in COIN, joint

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(All notes appear in shortended form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in bibliography)

<sup>1</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Joint Forces Command Joint Warfighting Center, Irregular Warfare Special Study Group, 4 August 2006, II-7.

doctrine will need to be developed and implemented. As a starting point, this paper will analyze current service COIN doctrine, or lack thereof, and broadly identify key tenets and shortfalls with respect to airpower. Building upon this background, this paper will briefly explore the historical evolution of airpower in COIN, specifically past and current operations in the Middle East and identify key lessons learned. Finally after integrating the information, this paper will outline airpower missions and considerations for joint COIN doctrine development in the future.

### ***Doctrine, Airpower, and COIN***

*“Without soundfully written and skillfully applied doctrine, major operations and campaigns are likely to fail.”<sup>3</sup>*

Before analyzing and making recommendations for joint COIN doctrine we must alleviate any confusion based upon the myriad of terms and definitions used to describe doctrine, airpower, and counterinsurgency.

**Doctrine**, simply stated, describes who we are, what we are doing, and how we should do it. According to Joint Publication 1-02 (JP 1-02), *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, doctrine is described as “the fundamental principles by which military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives.”<sup>4</sup> More importantly, Joint Pub 1-02 describes *joint doctrine* as “fundamental principles that guide military forces in *coordinated* action toward a common objective.”<sup>5</sup> One important aspect of this definition may not be apparent- *coordinated* action within the military is important, but doctrine should also stress coordination with entities like the U.S. interagency, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations. Moreover, the

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<sup>3</sup> Vego, *Operational Warfare*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 166.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

doctrine for joint COIN operations will have to adapt airpower's distinctive capabilities of air superiority, precision engagement, and agile combat support to ensure the negative effects of airpower on diverse cultures is mitigated.<sup>6</sup>

Doctrine codifies lessons learned and provides the guidance for conducting joint and multinational activities across the full range of military operations.<sup>7</sup> Essentially, joint doctrine is the standardized foundation that provides the JFC with basic guidance to defeat an adversary and is essential for sound command and control (C2), unity of effort, synchronization and integration of military activities across the full range of military operations. It is important to highlight that the differences in service doctrine today, unlike joint doctrine, are counterproductive to achieving sound C2, unity of effort, synchronization and integration of military activities.

***Airpower** may be described as “the ability to do something in the air...the ability to project military force through a platform in the third dimension above the surface of the earth.”<sup>8</sup>*

Throughout U.S. history most definitions of airpower were geared toward the conventional application of airpower and centered on service cultures and capabilities, while its latent application and ability to distribute force were often overlooked. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) often related airpower to strategic bombing campaigns and nuclear weapons while the U.S. Navy's definition centered on fleet protection and tactical power projection ashore.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. Army and Marine Corps are the most familiar with airpower and its potential use in COIN operations since their service doctrine is centered on coordination with ground forces in a supporting role.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Downs, “Unconventional Airpower,” 21.

<sup>7</sup> JP 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, II-1.

<sup>8</sup> Clodfelter, “Airpower Versus Asymmetric Enemies,” 2.

<sup>9</sup> Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 7-9.

<sup>10</sup> Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 10-11.



Following major combat, there exists increased disparity between airpower's traditional "kinetic kill" and the remaining effects to be achieved.<sup>11</sup> While destroying targets or killing insurgents may be necessary in COIN operations, military and political leaders must realize airpower can profoundly influence the human condition at the same time. The airpower missions in COIN are varied in number and include everything from kill and destroy to build and sustain.<sup>12</sup> The *build and sustain* missions include humanitarian and government support to the host-nation (HN), like humanitarian aid drops, HN air force development and other Foreign Internal Defense (FID) type missions.<sup>13</sup>

**Counterinsurgency** is usually lumped together in a variety of terms and concepts in joint publications and service doctrine. The fact that COIN operations are addressed in more than 30 joint publications and have been referenced using a variety of terms ranging from guerilla warfare, irregular warfare (IW), low intensity conflict (LIC), military operations other than war (MOOTW), and small wars leads many to wonder where to begin in doctrine development.<sup>14</sup> JP 1-02, *Department of Defense (DoD) Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, defines counterinsurgency as "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency."<sup>15</sup> Although most publications agree with some form of this definition, the fact that counterinsurgency operations are buried under an umbrella of other terms and not directly referenced in stand-alone joint doctrine is puzzling. The unique nature of

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<sup>11</sup> Read, "Effects-Based Airpower for Small Wars," 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Host-nation refers to a nation which permits, either by written agreement or official invitation, government representatives and/or agencies of another nation to operate, under specified conditions, within its borders. *Also called host country* (JP 2-01.2).

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Joint Forces Command Joint Warfighting Center, *Irregular Warfare Special Study Group*, 4 August 2006, II-7.

<sup>15</sup> JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 128.



counterinsurgencies, much beyond the scope of this paper, warrants specific attention in joint doctrine and should not be hidden under the guise of other forms of warfare.

### *Service Doctrine*

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. military culture embraced the large, conventional war paradigm and fundamentally shunned small wars and insurgencies. The U.S. military ignored the COIN lessons learned in Vietnam, the Philippines and El Salvador and treated them more like aberrations or distractions from preparing to win large conventional wars against super powers.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the conventional-minded military has impeded the benefit of studying, distilling and incorporating into doctrine, the extensive lessons learned from these *smaller wars*.<sup>17</sup> The lack of attention in doctrine regarding COIN is scandalous considering the U.S. has extensive experience in over a dozen conflicts involving insurgents and is likely to be involved in many more in the future.<sup>18</sup>

According to a recent USAF article in the *Air and Space Power Journal*, “even as it appears that COIN will only become more common in the future, the Air Force has no workable doctrine for this emerging mission area.”<sup>19</sup> Following World War II, U.S. Army Air Service, Army Air Corps and later USAF, doctrine and theory were focused on large-scale conventional warfare with strategic and nuclear bombing as the center of attention.<sup>20</sup> A brief period of doctrine development in Army Field Manuals guided USAF employment considerations leading up to and during the Vietnam War.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, lessons learned

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<sup>16</sup> Cassidy, “Back to the Street Without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons Learned from Vietnam and other Small Wars,” 75.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Beebe, “The Air Force’s Missing Doctrine,”.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

during this COIN effort were not documented and doctrine for how to use air forces in COIN ceases to exist today.<sup>22</sup>

So what does Air Force doctrine say about COIN? The current version of Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 2, *Operations and Organization*, does not mention airpower and COIN with the exception of a listing under contingency and crisis response operations.<sup>23</sup> AFDD 2-3.1, *Foreign Internal Defense*, briefly mentions COIN operations and airpower's role in close air support (CAS) but reserves the more lengthy discussion of COIN for an appendix and mentions nothing in particular about airpower.<sup>24</sup> The USAF's most legitimate and comprehensive effort on airpower and COIN is contained in a partially completed version of AFDD 2-3.X, *Irregular Warfare*, that has yet to be signed and published. COIN operations are included under the umbrella of irregular warfare (IW) and specifically addressed in two unfinished chapters. The key tenets the doctrine stresses are security, alleviating root causes, targeting insurgent leaders and supporters, and disrupting enemy movements.<sup>25</sup> While this is a step in the right direction, the fact remains the document is partially completed and does not address COIN operations in a document unto itself.

Unlike their service counterparts, U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) and U.S. Army (USA), are closely affiliated with and equipped to support their respective ground elements.<sup>26</sup> This not only justifies the need for a separate air component but greatly enhances the coordination between the air and ground elements of these services. Both services have extensive experience fighting insurgencies throughout U.S. history and have published doctrine relating to COIN warfare. However, recent doctrine fails to specifically address airpower's role in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> AFDD 2, *Operations and Organization*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> AFDD 2-3.1, *Foreign Internal Defense*, 18-54.

<sup>25</sup> AFDD 2-3.X, *Irregular Warfare*, 15-19.

<sup>26</sup> Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 10.

operations.<sup>27</sup> The USA and USMC have addressed this shortfall with the release of Field Manual (FM) 3-24 and Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5 in December 2006. This multiservice publication finally addresses COIN for what it is and not under the umbrella of other forms of warfare while including an annex dedicated to the role of airpower in COIN operations. The main tenets described in the airpower annex include airpower in the strike role, intelligence collection, information operations, and the logistics role.<sup>28</sup> The annex briefly mentions the role technology plays in COIN operations and the importance of support to HN airpower capability. The extensive review of COIN operations in this document serves as a stepping stone to the development of future *joint doctrine*.

The lack of U.S. Navy (USN) doctrine in COIN related operations is not surprising. Naval Doctrinal Publication (NDP) 1-0, *Naval Warfare*, does not mention counterinsurgency or any commonly used term describing COIN operations.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the majority of COIN operations are land-locked and require extensive coordination with ground forces has hindered doctrinal development throughout naval history.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, fleet commanders have been reluctant to supply air assets in support of other commanders for fear of losing them for the “all important” sea control missions centered around the battle group.<sup>31</sup> According to USN doctrine development professionals at the Naval Warfare Development Command, a query of existing USN databases turned up few details specific to airpower’s role in COIN operations.<sup>32</sup> The majority of information and standardized procedures are

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<sup>27</sup> For examples see U.S. Marine Corps, Small Wars Manual, 1940 Edition, <http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/SWM/1215.pdf>, (accessed 19 April 2007), and US Army Field Manual 3-07, Stability and Support Operations, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/service\\_publications\\_usarmy\\_pubs.htm](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/service_publications_usarmy_pubs.htm), (accessed 19 April 2007).

<sup>28</sup> FM 3-24 and MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, E-1-E5.

<sup>29</sup> NDP 1, *Naval Warfare*, 1-74.

<sup>30</sup> Winnefeld and Johnson, *Joint Air Operations*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Dave Hellner, Naval Warfare Development Command, email message to author, 02 April 2007.

mostly “buried” in classified training, tactics and procedure (TTP) publications.<sup>33</sup> The fact the USN is currently flying missions in countries with active insurgencies without formal doctrine is cause for concern.

Many services have neglected to incorporate historical cases and lessons learned into comprehensive doctrinal publications. Furthermore, if COIN doctrine has been written or implemented, it appears to have been brushed aside for the more conventionally-minded military roles suffering from the “last war syndrome” and self-serving service cultures that has dominated U.S. military history. Some services, namely the USA and USMC, have taken positive steps in the development of COIN doctrine - the time has come for U.S. military professionals and warfighters to develop *joint doctrine* to ensure the effective employment of airpower during COIN operations.

### ***COIN and Airpower Lessons Learned***

*A comprehensive history of the use of airpower in small wars is relevant and useful to the airman, the soldier, and the military and political leader.*<sup>34</sup>

There are many theories circulating today in top military and defense circles about how the U.S. can employ airpower against insurgents. However, the application of theory, when not firmly grounded in historical experience, can often lead to disastrous results.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, lessons from war experiences can provide the framework for and be of the utmost importance in the development of armed force doctrine.<sup>36</sup> By briefly looking at the historical relevance of airpower during insurgencies in the Middle East, like past and current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, one can draw conclusions that can benefit doctrine development and future COIN operations.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>36</sup> Vego, “Operational War Addendum,” 87.

In the aftermath of World War I, the British devised ways to police their vast empire of colonies ranging from Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq while drawing down forces and financially supporting operations efficiently and inexpensively.<sup>37</sup> Luckily, the continued development of the airplane during World War I and II created a weapon with the near-miraculous properties of lengthening the arm of the government, while reducing the money and manpower required to complete the mission.<sup>38</sup> The exponents of airpower at the time firmly believed that the aircraft, as yet unproven, would be critical in establishing and maintaining internal security, while morally effecting the population with minimal use of force. During the early years of British rule in Iraq, the Royal Air Force (RAF) provided air control in which aerial bombardment replaced the conventional ground force expeditions of prior years. In doing so, the RAF could provide an impressive amount of firepower that could reach the enemy quickly and provide the same effects as the larger and more cumbersome ground force expeditions. As time passed the role of airpower was expanded beyond direct action to include policing, reconnaissance, and “coercing” the collection of taxes.

The limited successes of airpower in this time period were not without some pitfalls. Group accountability, which is the punishment of a large group of individuals for the wrongdoings of a few, resulted in the deaths of many innocent people, including women and children.<sup>39</sup> Combine these effects with the inherent difficulty of target identification and the accuracy of weapons of the current period, and the positive aspects of airpower were often overshadowed by stark criticism. To make air control more palatable to the politicians, the media, and the local populations, the humanitarian aspect of air control was stressed and

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<sup>37</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Townsend, “Civilization and Frightfulness,” 143.

<sup>39</sup> Townsend, “Civilization and Frightfulness,” 143.

precautionary measures, such as warnings and evacuations of villages prior to bombings, were allowed, but not always followed.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, the criticism of airpower during this period falls short when considering the army's punitive expeditions routinely burned the crops and food stores of rebellious tribes and fired artillery into villages causing significant human misery.<sup>41</sup>

In the end, the British were partially successful with the use of airpower in the 14 years of British mandate in Iraq.<sup>42</sup> They were able to suppress the counterinsurgency with a smaller footprint, at a lower cost monetarily, and with less loss of human life than conventional armies of the time. The colonial wars proved that aviation was tremendously effective as a force multiplier.<sup>43</sup> Airpower proved more effective than traditional cavalry in the reconnaissance role and could bring more fire power, materiel, and manpower to the fight in a shorter period of time, with less cost and over greater distances. Airpower also provided the commander the operational depth to attack deep in enemy territory and operational mobility to maneuver against multiple fronts at the same time. One key note, Great Britain's hope in airpower's capability to psychologically effect the insurgents' will to fight back-fired – in contrast it was taken as a Western threat and often strengthened the will of the enemy to resist.<sup>44</sup>

Most importantly the British finally realized that airpower was not subordinate or superior; rather it was a partner or colleague of ground forces.<sup>45</sup> Inter-service cooperation was paramount to the success of fighting counterinsurgencies but was not limited to the

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<sup>40</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Townsend, "Civilization and Frightfulness," 156.

<sup>45</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 216.

military alone. The British learned to effectively integrate intelligence services and civilian agencies to the overall effort of counterinsurgencies as well.

Fast forward a half-century to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) and the Pentagon quickly found itself facing a determined insurgency in Iraq while dealing with the reemergence of the Taliban insurgency inside Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> Airpower's role in the aftermath of major combat in OIF and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM has often been overshadowed by its overarching success during the kinetic phase of the conflict. The airspace above Iraq and Afghanistan is filled with Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force aircraft contributing to the overall effort of the coalition fighting forces and provides an asymmetric advantage and additional leverage to the JFC to counter the insurgencies in those countries today.

Much like COIN operations of the colonial period, support of ground operations remains the number one priority articulated by the JFC and joint force air component commander (JFACC) in Iraq.<sup>47</sup> Airpower drastically reduces the operational factors of time and space, while exponentially increasing the amount of force available to troops on the ground. The ability of airpower to respond to troops-in-contact (TIC) situations in minimal time and over a wider area mitigates the advantage the insurgent often searches for in harassment and ambush tactics. In addition to supporting TICs, airpower missions provide lethal fires in time-sensitive targeting (TST) operations and CAS roles. TSTs are beneficial in attacking insurgent and terrorist leadership like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, while CAS provides direct support to ground forces enabling freedom of maneuver, mobility, and initiative.

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<sup>46</sup> Beebe, "The Air Force's Missing Doctrine,".

<sup>47</sup> Belote, "Counterinsurgency Airpower, Air-Ground Integration for the Long War," 57.

The number of nonlethal missions continues to dominate airpower's role in counterinsurgencies today. "On a countrywide scale, fighter aircraft conduct infrastructure-security missions, simultaneously fulfilling the multinational-force commander's strategic priority of protecting Iraq's lifeblood-oil and electrical systems-from insurgent attacks."<sup>48</sup> The indirect role of airpower in show-of-force (SOF) missions in support of elections and crowd control can not be underestimated.<sup>49</sup> In the words of General Metz, Commanding General III Corps, when advised by skeptical analysts to keep aircraft out of sight and mind during early nationwide elections: "Absolutely not. I want them low-I want them loud-and I want them everywhere, I don't understand it but this population responds to airpower, both fixed and rotary-wing...so get air out there."<sup>50</sup>

Airpower provides intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets to improve situational awareness on all levels of war through persistent airborne coverage of large areas. In OIF today, light aircraft patrol remote areas while unmanned aerial vehicles and stationary balloons provide military and political leaders information on the disposition of insurgent forces and patrol a country's borders denying the insurgent freedom of movement and sanctuary.<sup>51</sup>

Airpower provides a significant asymmetric advantage to COIN forces by enabling U.S. forces to rapidly deploy, reposition, and supply land forces, while denying the insurgent the ability to attack vulnerable lines of communications.<sup>52</sup> Airlift also provides uninterrupted

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>49</sup> For more on show of force using air and space power, see Air Presence, AFDD 2, *Operations and Organization*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Belote, "Counterinsurgency Airpower," 59.

<sup>51</sup> FM 3-24 and MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, E-3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., E-4.



intra and inter-theater logistical support, while carrying greater payloads and servicing remote areas inaccessible to land forces.

While airpower offers the JFC many advantages in modern insurgencies it does not come without some significant drawbacks. The unique nature of insurgencies in the Middle East, like colonial times of the past, presents several problems when regarding targeting, collateral damage, and joint coordination.

Even with the advent of technology, targeting insurgents, their “hiding places” and their centers of gravity continues to be a problem. Insurgents’ guerilla tactics mitigate the superior firepower of conventional airpower by eliminating lucrative targets.<sup>53</sup> The ability of insurgents to blend into their surroundings and move amongst the population removes one of airpower’s unique advantages of the *high ground*. When airpower does strike, insurgents have little concern for the civilian population and often place them “in the line of fire.” The resulting propaganda often portrays civilian casualties in the world media as targets of U.S. airpower and reflects negatively on the HN government and in the international and domestic arena.<sup>54</sup> In Iraq and Afghanistan, military and political leaders continually face the paradox of taking no action at all and emboldening the insurgents versus taking action and suffering the negative consequences of collateral damage in the media spotlight.

The continued lack of joint coordination among U.S. services and allies continues to reduce the synergistic effects airpower can bring to COIN operations. Joint integration of lethal and nonlethal fires, airspace integration, and common C2 during the battle of Fallujah in November 2004 was exacerbated by a lack of common doctrine and joint training

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<sup>53</sup> Drew, “U.S. Airpower Theory and the Insurgent Challenge: A Short Journey to Confusion,” 811.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 811.

experience.<sup>55</sup> Joint doctrine and training are necessary precursors to successful COIN operations of the future. The idea that airpower can “go at it alone” or be the primary focus in an insurgency is wrong. Similar to the colonial insurgency in Iraq, airpower must be carefully coordinated with all other services, including police, intelligence, and civil affair teams, in order to be effective.

In the few cases where historians have addressed airpower in COIN, most tended to get it wrong or misinterpret the lessons learned.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, many have used lessons learned from a single conflict or with a different culture; as a result, the COIN effort failed.<sup>57</sup> It is very important to note that all COIN operations are different and require extensive assessments during planning and throughout the operational phases of the conflict.

Over the past decade in the Middle East, the ability of airpower to act as a force enhancer by providing security, strike, logistical, and intelligence capabilities in support of counterinsurgencies is significant. Moreover, the experience in Iraq points to the fact that the kinetic aspect of airpower is sometimes counterproductive to the COIN effort and should be reserved for a time when collateral damage and unnecessary injury can be minimized. Bombing civilians often result in enhancing the peoples’ will when the opposite effect was desired. One of the most valuable lessons learned is that airpower cannot do it by itself - joint coordination and doctrine among all military services and other government agencies is paramount to a successful COIN operation.

### ***The Way Ahead: Considerations for Joint Doctrine in the Future***

Joint doctrine is a fundamental requirement for ensuring military forces are employed in the most effective and efficient manner. Joint COIN doctrine will assist the U.S. to

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<sup>55</sup> Belote, “Counterinsurgency Airpower, Air-Ground Integration for the Long War,” 58.

<sup>56</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Vego, “Operational War Addendum,” 99.

prepare and fight future conflicts by codifying lessons of the past and ensuring unity of effort, synergy, effects, and C2 are maximized, while at the same time highlighting the importance of legitimacy and restraint in COIN operations. Before developing joint doctrine, military professionals must consider a variety of issues particular to airpower and the nature of counterinsurgencies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The next section of the paper will identify key missions and considerations for airpower in joint doctrine development. This is by no means an all-inclusive list, but it does provide major considerations in the development of joint doctrine for future COIN operations employing the unique capabilities of airpower.

### ***Missions***

The **strike** capability of airpower during COIN operations is still considerable, but commanders must take the necessary precautions to ensure the negative aspects of collateral damage and propaganda are negated prior to approving its use. Careful selection of targets and weaponry will mitigate unnecessary civilian casualties, while coordinated efforts with ground and intelligence forces (indigenous preferably) will enable engagement of key insurgency targets. Cooperation with the local government and populace will be critical to maximize the benefit of airpower in the strike role. While technology cannot replace good judgment, the advent of precision munitions with small blast effects and the further development of nonlethal weapons will broaden the strike role of airpower in future COIN operations.

The **support role** of airpower will continue to dominate future COIN operations. The unique advantages of airpower in the security, reconnaissance (intelligence) and logistical roles will give commanders the necessary leverage and asymmetric advantage to overcome vulnerabilities routinely sought by insurgents fighting irregular warfare. Due to the nature of

COIN warfare, the population, their security, and underlying causes of the insurgency can be effected by airpower in the support role.

**Security** precedes all subsequent COIN operations and is enabled by airpower's role in population, infrastructure, and area security. While airpower cannot perform security missions alone, the ability to police large areas of ungoverned space, provide information to police and military forces on the whereabouts of insurgents (to enable capture or to eliminate), and provide presence and security over critical infrastructure and friendly military positions increases general population support and undermines the insurgent's cause. In the supporting role, airpower brings "economy of force" into the equation by allowing a much smaller force to accomplish COIN missions at the same time reducing the negative implications of a large military "footprint" on the ground.

Airpower in the **reconnaissance** and **intelligence** roles also undermines the insurgent's freedom of movement and perceived sanctuary. The employment of UAVs, in conjunction with other assets (aircraft, balloons, satellites, HUMINT), increases situational awareness of commanders at all levels of war, as well as, political leaders away from the theater of operations (TOO). This unique capability of airpower significantly contributes to the overall intelligence effort and provides persistent coverage of insurgent movements, infrastructure, and possible insurgent ambush positions to friendly forces. Current and future airpower will contribute to information superiority and electronic attack by shaping, exploiting, and degrading the insurgents' use of the EW spectrum while protecting our own.

The **logistical** support airpower brings to COIN operations is significant. The ability to support the HN government by bringing supplies, materiel, and aid over long distances, unhindered by borders and terrain considerations with a small (almost non-existent) military

“footprint” is one of the unique capabilities of airpower. Many logistical support functions of airpower, from humanitarian assistance to HN air force development, will help address local grievances and increase the legitimacy of the HN government and COIN forces. The logistical support provided by airpower also provides inter and intra-theater lift, enabling the operational functions of mobility and maneuver, while carrying the elements of initiative and surprise to the enemy. Airpower in this sense is a *force multiplier* by allowing rapid concentration or distribution of forces with the added benefit airpower can provide in firepower protection. Airpower logistical support also reduces or eliminates the often vulnerable LOCs that are exposed to insurgent attacks over land in the TOO, while saving lives at the same time.

### ***Other Considerations***

History demonstrates that **coordinated joint operations** is the most effective employment of airpower in counterinsurgencies.<sup>58</sup> Airpower must be carefully coordinated with ground forces to ensure military success while working closely with HN government and civil agencies, as well as, other U.S. and international organizations. This will most likely ensure unity of effort and integrated C2 across the diplomatic, information, military and economic spectrum, while building long-term relationships in order to increase HN legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

Once the shooting stops there is still much to be accomplished. **Host-nation support** that airpower brings to COIN operations in the form of security, logistics and reconnaissance must be continued. Helping HN build capacity in training, infrastructure (airfields, airspace), hardware, and tactics is vital to stability once military forces leave the TOO. The USAF Special Operations Command has qualified teams with diverse cultural background and

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<sup>58</sup> Corum and Johnson, *Air Power in Small Wars*, 433.

qualifications to effectively support HN requirements.<sup>59</sup> The US and other nations must provide a low-cost and uncomplicated aircraft that will perform the most critical airpower missions while at the same time increasing HN *legitimacy* in the eyes of the population.

### ***Conclusion***

Although airpower is not a substitute for boots on the ground, the unique capabilities it brings to the JFC as a force multiplier in the supporting role, combined with the ability to rapidly strike, maintain persistent coverage, and enable movement on the operational battlefield should not be overlooked. By codifying lessons learned and supplementing existing service doctrine and TTPs with the formation of joint doctrine, airpower can be effectively employed to maximize unity of effort and attain desirable effects in COIN operations.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the anti-colonial and Marxist insurgencies of the past have long been replaced by today's more fundamental, ethnic, and ideology-based insurgencies. As these insurgencies evolve so must the methods, missions, and considerations of airpower employment in COIN operations. By taking into account the lessons learned and recommendations in this paper, joint doctrine development in COIN operations can begin in earnest to ensure airpower's role in such a conflict is utilized correctly and efficiently.

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<sup>59</sup> FM 3-24 and MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, E-5.

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